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ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent to which teachers maintained that educational research provided them with practical suggestions for improving instruction. In addition, the study sought to determine why educational research may not influence classroom teaching. A total of 159 elementary and secondary school teachers from 5 districts in the Southwest answered a needs assessment survey which examined their attitudes regarding the importance of educational research and the role teacher education courses had in helping them to: (1) understand educational research studies; and (2) translate educational research findings to classroom applications. About 48 percent agreed that educational research provided them with practical suggestions for improving instruction, and almost 45 percent indicated that undergraduate courses helped them to understand such studies. However, only 37 percent felt that their teacher education professors helped them to translate the research to classroom applications. Among the teachers who had taken graduate education courses, there was a larger percentage that felt that courses and professors had helped them to understand and apply educational research. (CB)

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Using Research Knowledge to Improve Teacher Education: Teachers' Perceptions of the Value of Educational Research

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A number of sweeping statements about the failure of research to have any influence on educational practice have been made by educators in the mainstream as well as by critics outside the field (Eisner, 1984; Price, 1984). A common explanation for this phenomena is that researchers and teachers have different assumptions about the teaching process and, as a result, educational research addresses questions that are not important to teachers (Bolster, 1983; Eisner, 1984; Huling, Trang, & Correll, 1981; Tom, 1984). Furthermore, it has been argued that since preservice teachers do not learn about research findings that assist their instruction, they resort to solving problems on a trial and error basis which "gradually alienates them from the intellectual roots of their profession" (Joyce & Clift, 1984, p. 16).

The objective of the present study is to examine the extent to which teachers maintain that educational research has provided them with practical suggestions for improving their instruction. In addition, this study investigates two plausible explanations of why educational research may not influence classroom teaching. First, teachers' perceptions of the degree to which education institutions help teachers acquire the skills necessary to understand educational research are examined. Second, teachers' perceptions of the degree to which teacher educators translate research findings into classroom applications are also investigated.

Data Sources and Methods

One hundred fifty-nine elementary and secondary school teachers from five school districts in the Southwest participated in the study. During a summer inservice session, these teachers were administered a needs assessment survey which examined their attitudes regarding the importance of educational research and the role teacher education courses played in helping them: (a) acquire the appropriate skills in order to understand educational research studies, and (b) translate educational research to classroom applications. In addition, a variety of background information was collected from all the teachers in the study.

The present study is part of a larger study (Freiberg & Waxman, 1984) which also examines: (a) the sources where teachers acquire research knowledge, (b) the areas that teachers would like to receive research information, and (c) innovative approaches of acquiring educational research.

Results

Table 1 reports the results from the descriptive analyses. Approximately 48 percent of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that educational research provided them with practical suggestions on improving their instruction. Nearly 45 percent of the teachers indicated that their undergraduate teacher education courses helped them acquire the appropriate skills in order to understand educational research studies. However, only 37 percent responded that their teacher education professors helped them translate the research to classroom applications.

Seventy percent of the teachers who have taken graduate education courses indicated that those courses helped them acquire the appropriate skills in order to understand educational research. Similarly, nearly 65 percent of these teachers indicated that their graduate education courses helped them apply educational research to the classroom. Approximately 50 percent responded that their graduate education professors seemed to understand the realities of the classroom.

Several significant differences were found among the various background and contextual data. Inexperienced teachers (i.e., teachers with 1-3 years of experience) had more positive attitudes ($F = 2.61$; $p < .05$) toward the value of educational research for improving their instruction than more experienced teachers. In comparison to male teachers, female teachers had more positive attitudes towards: (1) their undergraduate teacher education courses in helping them acquire the appropriate skills in order to understand research ($F = 6.37$; $p < .001$), and (2) the extent to which undergraduate teacher education professors helped them translate research to classroom applications.

Educational Significance of the Study

Although teachers have indicated that they are very interested in receiving research information on a variety of areas (Freiberg & Waxman, 1984; Lanier & Glassburg, 1981), the results of the present study suggest that undergraduate teacher education courses have not helped many teachers apply educational research to the classroom. Furthermore, more emphasis must be put on providing prospective and inservice teachers with the appropriate skills necessary to help them understand educational research studies. As the results of this study indicate, this problem is quite prevalent in undergraduate teacher education.

Some critics argue that research cannot solve the problems of teacher education (Tom, 1980), but others maintain that teacher education can solve some of the problems of educational research by facilitating, critically reviewing, synthesizing, summarizing, collaborating, and sharing research findings with classroom teachers (Fisher & Berliner, 1979; Huling, Trang, & Correll, 1981; Lanier & Glassburg, 1981; Tikunoff & Ward, 1983). However, before teacher educators can begin to translate research into practice, they must make sure that teachers are secure in their understanding of educational research. Unless teachers have the prerequisite skills necessary to understand research, the chance of them utilizing research is remote. Programmatic consistency (Duffy & Roehler, 1982) must exist in teacher education programs to ensure that all teachers are exposed

to an introduction to educational research as well as a deliberate and conscious integration of research that has been found to improve classroom instruction.

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TABLE 1

Overall Frequencies of Responses in Percents

	N	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Educational Research has not provided me with practical suggestions on improving my instruction.	159	10.7%	37.8	44.0	8.2
2. My undergraduate teacher education ncourses helped me acquire the appropriate skills in order to understand educational research studies.	159	6.3	38.4	34.0	21.4
3. My undergraduate teacher education professors helped me translate the research to classroom applications.	156	5.8	31.4	37.8	25.0
4. My graduate education courses helped me acquire the appropriate skills in order to understand educational research.	96	15.6	54.2	26.0	4.2
5. My graduate education courses did not help me apply educational research to the classroom.	94	6.4	28.7	45.7	19.1
6. My graduate education professors seemed to understand the realities of the classroom.	93	9.7	44.1	37.6	8.6

(Waxman & Freiberg, 1985)